

Homily for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Fr Steele Hartmann

“Lord, do you mean this parable for us, or for everyone?” (Luke 12:41) This word at least, from today’s Gospel, is one we can all relate to, for how often do we assume that the word we hear is not for us but for someone else? So we switch off, become inattentive, allow ourselves to be distracted by more stimulating thoughts of our own — and so not hear the Lord’s challenge addressed to us. And it is a challenging word, for today’s Gospel starts off: “Sell your possessions and give alms.” This is a word for YOU! as well as for me.

Lest we settle ourselves by reminding ourselves that we DO give to the poor, St Luke later tells us of a story of Jesus, while watching rich people putting money in the poor box at the Temple, who, upon seeing a poor widow put in two pennies, says to us, “This poor widow has put in more than any of them, for they all contributed money they had over, but she, from the little she has, has put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:1-4) When Jesus says to us, “Sell your possessions and give alms,” he is not talking about merely giving a donation. So he says to us reassuringly, “There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom.” (Luke 12:32) Giving of our excess would cause most of us to lose little sleep: why, then, might we be afraid? What Jesus has in mind is a little more radical.

This he puts bluntly to the rich man who comes to him and asks him, “Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replies, “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come follow me.” Is this not the same word Jesus speaks to us this morning: “Sell your possessions and give alms. Get yourselves purses that do not wear out, treasure that will not fail you, in heaven where no thief can reach it and no moth destroy it”? When he heard this, we are told, the rich man was filled with sadness, for he was very rich. So Jesus says to us, “How hard it is for those who have riches to make their way into the Kingdom of God!” (Luke 18:18ff) I expect at this point, if we have been listening, we will be starting to feel a little uneasy, perhaps even uncomfortable, maybe even a little sad. Jesus’ word to us is not always an easy word. How on earth are we to respond?

Peter’s question is rephrased after rich man’s encounter with the Jesus: “What about us? We have left all and followed you,” prompting Jesus to reply, “There is no one who has left house, wife, brother, parents or children for the sake of the Kingdom of God who will not be given repayment many times over in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life.” (Luke 18:28-30) Or as Jesus put it to us this morning: “Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom.” Peter’s question about the parable stems from the fact that he and the other disciples have left everything and followed him. In the context of Jesus’ word, “Sell your possessions,” Peter wants to know if the parable is for such as the rich man, or is it for disciples; he is unsure, for the parable speaks of Master and servants, echoing Master and disciples. So Jesus sharpen the focus a little and speaks of how those who have left everything should live and the reward they can expect on their Master’s return: ‘He

will place him over everything he owns' (Luke 12:44) 'He will give you the Kingdom.' His word is for disciples; it is for us: "Fear not, little flock."

The parable of the waiting servants begins: "Let your loins be girded ..." (Luke 12:35) This, of course, is a reference back to the 'first' Passover meal when Israel was still in slavery back in Egypt: "You shall eat it like this: with a girdle round your waist, sandals on your feet, a staff in your hand. You shall eat it hastily; it is a Passover in honour of YHWH." (Exodus 12:11) Luke's community had expected the Lord to return almost immediately. At the time of writing his Gospel some 50 years had passed and the Lord still had not returned. Some had already died, others were frustrated by the delay, still others began to throw care to the winds. Luke wanted to call them back to vigilance and fidelity, hence the reference to that first Passover. For back then, WHILE they were still slaves, they ate a quick meal, dressed ready for a quick departure, as though what was to happen was already a done deal — because they believed that God would do as he promised and deliver them from the powerful might of Egypt. The return of the coming Lord was to usher the waiting believers into the eternal banquet of salvation where, as today's reading puts it, 'the Lord himself will put on an apron, sit them down at table and wait on them.' (Luke 12:37) So the early Christian community, when the Lord did not return as expected, in the spirit of the Israelite community before them, began to celebrate an agape-Eucharist in which they sat down in anticipation and began the feast, making real in the now what is to come, making it a statement of their belief that the Lord will be true to his promise, will come as he said. This we still do each time we celebrate Eucharist.

This, then, is how the disciples are to live: believing that the Lord will do as he said. This, too, is the thrust of our first two readings. The Book of Wisdom tells us: "That night (that Passover night back in Egypt) had been foretold to our ancestors so that, once they saw what kind of oaths they had put their trust in (that is, an oath sworn to them by God c.f. Hebrews 6:17-19), they would joyfully take courage ... and forthwith began to chant the hymns of their fathers." (Wisdom 18:6, 9) These hymns are a reference to the Hallel that was chanted at Passovers. These Psalms proclaim the greatness and the faithfulness of Israel's God. In them Israel states that, when hard-pressed by the enemy, it will, in advance, give thanks and praise to God for saving them, for it knows he will uphold them as he has promised. (see Psalms 113-118) This act of giving thanks and praise, when all about menacingly scoffs: "Where is your God?" (Psalm 115:2), is a way of taking courage, of drawing strength from a belief in a faithful God, especially when the chips are down. Today we live in an age where the shout, "Where is your God?" has become a roar. We could do worse than to join in, eagerly and with gusto, our Eucharistic celebration, in which we proclaim our trust in the Lord. We, as disciples, need to do this to reinforce and bolster our belief that our Lord is a God who is faithful to his promises.

The Letter to the Hebrews likewise holds out faith as the way we should go, if we are to be saved, if we are to reach our 'heavenly homeland'. (Hebrews 11:16) It especially puts before us the figure of Abraham, of whom St Paul was to say: "Beyond all hope he believed that he would become the father of many nations according to what was said, 'so numerous shall your descendants be'. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead for he was about one

hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. At the promise of God he did not waver in unbelief, but was empowered by faith, giving glory to God by being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith was credited to him for righteousness." This is the kind of faith we are to have. If we have Abraham's faith, believing that the Lord can do as he promised, we, too, will be made righteous before God and be able to take our place at the heavenly banquet when he comes.

As to our possessions, "Fear not, little flock." Today's reading speaks to us of the steward who is 'faithful and wise enough for the master to place him over his household to give them their allowance of food at the proper time.' (Luke 12:42) This giving food to the members of the household is the clue. Later, in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke paints a picture for us of the early Christian community: 'None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money from them to present it to the Apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need.' (Acts 4:34-35) This was how the needs of the early Christian household were met. Thus this call of Jesus to sell your possessions and give alms is a call to "love one another." "As I have loved you," says Jesus, "you also must love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples."

It is a call to care for our neighbour, especially if they are in need. It is a plea, should what is asked of us cause us to balk and have second thoughts, to let love have its way — trusting that the Lord will take care of us should our care of our brother or sister cost us more than we are able to give, just as he said he will. In the passage immediately prior to this Gospel, Jesus says to us, "Think of the ravens. They do not sow or reap; they have no storehouses or barns; yet God feeds them all. And how much more are you worth than birds? ... You must not set your hearts on things to eat and things to drink; nor must you worry. It is the pagans of this world who set their hearts on all these things. Your Father well knows you need them. No; set your hearts on his kingdom, and these other things will be given you as well. There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:22ff) Our love then becomes our act of faith; it is the key, our way in, to our heavenly homeland, and through which we can now make really present the Kingdom that is to come.